

# Book Reviews

**Compassionate Fire:  
The Letters of Thomas Merton and  
Catherine de Hueck Doherty**  
edited by Robert A. Wild  
Ave Maria Press,  
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This slim volume brings together for the first time in one collection Thomas Merton's correspondence with Catherine de Hueck Doherty, the Baroness, as Merton frequently calls her in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and in his letters to her. Thomas Merton had first met Catherine Doherty in 1941 when she came to speak at St. Bonaventure College where Merton was teaching at that time. Inspired by her, Merton volunteered to help out at Friendship House in Harlem. Although they never met in person again after Merton's entry to the Abbey of Gethsemani in December 1941 their friendship continued to grow through their sporadic correspondence which continued until January 1966 and through their prayers for each other and their respective ministries.

It is wonderful that so many of these letters have been preserved in almost

their entirety and to have both sides of their correspondence available. (Merton's letters to Doherty were previously published in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, now out of print, with just one of those letters included in the more recently published volume *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*.) Only a couple of early letters by Thomas Merton from 1941 are missing. Merton himself refers back to these missing letters in one of his subsequent letters to Catherine and one of Catherine's letters is clearly answering one of these missing letters.

Except for one brief note by Merton, appended to a letter from one of his novices to Catherine, all of Merton's correspondence is identical to that included in *The Hidden Ground of Love*. This is really the only disappointing thing about *Compassionate Fire*. Errors of transcription that appeared in *The Hidden Ground of Love* are reproduced here and, more importantly, paragraphs that the editor, William Shannon, omitted are also missing from this volume. For example in a letter of November 12, 1962 three full paragraphs are omitted, paragraphs in which Merton speaks of his love of the woods, and the atmosphere in the period immediately after the Cuban missile crisis. However most of these omitted passages do not contain vital information, indeed many are very pious but, even so, the reader

loses something of the flavour that would be gained by the complete extant correspondence being published.

The editor of this volume, Robert A. Wild, is the postulator for the cause for Catherine's canonization. In his brief but succinct introduction Wild draws the attention of his reader to some of the important themes that occur in this correspondence, themes that would remain central to both Merton and Doherty for the remainder of their lives—holiness, real poverty, silence and solitude, and writing as an apostolate for the Church. Over the course of this correspondence readers will also see themes appearing that would come to occupy Merton in the final decade of his life, in particular relating to war and racial issues. One of Merton's earliest poems concerning racial issues, 'Aubade—Harlem', came out of his experiences working for Friendship House in Harlem and was in fact dedicated to Catherine Doherty. In the 1960s Doherty would comment on Merton's awareness of issues facing society writing to him saying 'all things reach you, and all news jumps your cloistered walls faster that they enter our open doors.'

Most readers of Merton's work will have some inkling of his prolificity as a writer—books, essays, book reviews—and some idea of his voluminous correspondence. Between 1963 and 1968 Merton corresponded with over 2,100 correspondents. However I was certainly less aware of the importance of writing to Catherine and this clearly come through over the course of their correspondence. As Robert Wild points out in his introduction she saw writing as 'one important form of the apostolate' and

this is reinforced in their correspondence as she tells Merton in 1941 that she already has '18-20 thick exercise books on my meditations' and later the same year tells him that she writes 9,000 letters a year.

Both Merton and Doherty struggled with periods of darkness in their lives and with the darkness of the world. They also struggled with their vocation to write and support each other in this ministry. So, for example, Catherine writes strongly encouraging Merton with his own writing and telling him that 'your writing will be like fire; and like sparks of the Holy Ghost, lighting torches everywhere to illuminate our terrific modern darkness,' like, as she would later write in response to one of Merton's cold war letters, 'a cry in the night, a very dark cry, a desperate cry, in a way, out of a very dark night.'

Their relationship is succinctly summed up in a letter of 1958 when Doherty writes saying 'to me, in a manner of speaking, you are a son. And in another sense, a Father. And in a third, a brother,' or again, a friend to 'my soul.' As I read these letters I frequently felt that the same sentiment could have been written by Merton—seeing Doherty at times as a daughter, a Mother or a sister, and as a soul friend. It is these familial relations, along with their deep spirituality and their overflowing compassion for the world, that are central to the friendship between Thomas Merton and Catherine Doherty and which make this small collection so insightful, warm and inspiring.

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